



Body image in transgender young people: Findings from a qualitative, community based study



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ABSTRACT

The goal of this study was to examine the ways in which transgender youth experience their bodies with regard to gender and body size. Ninety transgender youth and young adults completed in-depth interviews in eight metropolitan areas of the United States, Canada, and Ireland. Using a queer perspective, qualitative analyses revealed two broad conceptual categories: body dissatisfaction and body satisfaction. Within these categories, participants focused on body issues related to gender characteristics and body size. Findings revealed evidence of self-criticism and social distress related to body image dissatisfaction and self-acceptance and social acceptance related to body image satisfaction. Data demonstrated how gender, body size, and the intersection of gender and body size influenced personal perceptions of body dissatisfaction and satisfaction. Developmental processes were evident: participants further along in consolidating a gender identity described gaining a sense of social awareness, self-acceptance, and body satisfaction reflecting a sense of resilience.

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Introduction

Although recent research has examined weight and body image among lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth, with some likely being gender variant (Austin et al., 2009; Calzo, Corliss, Blood, Field, & Austin, 2013; Carper, Negy, & Tantleff-Dunn, 2010; Hadland, Austin, Goodenow, & Calzo, 2014), studies specifically regarding body image among only transgender adolescents and young adults are fairly limited. Knowledge about body image in a broader population of youth serves to guide research in this emerging area. Body image is especially salient among adolescents and young adults as they adjust to their newly sexually mature bodies and adapt to the weight gain common for this period of life. Furthermore, stereotypical gender expectations can exacerbate young peoples' concern with their own appearance and may contribute to body dissatisfaction (Gillen & Lefkowitz, 2006; Murray, Rieger, & Byrne, 2013). What is not well understood about transgender youth and young adults is the extent to which body image is viewed through a lens of concerns with leanness (or lean muscularity), concerns with gender incongruence, or personal expectations of meeting stereotypical gender norms.

We examine body image with regard to gender concerns and body size among 90 transgender adolescents and young adults. We situate this research within a queer theoretical paradigm which maintains a resistant relation with what constitutes “normal” (Jagose, 1996). A queer theory framework dictates that gender identity, body size, and cultural norms are intersectional, meaning that one may evaluate body size and shape differently based on gender identity and the specific cultural beliefs about body size and gender. For example, height and body curves are differentially associated with masculinity across different ethnic and queer cultures which may differentially evaluate height and curvature of women.

In this study, a queer theoretical paradigm aims to decenter heterosexist or heteronormative belief systems about bodies (Oswald, Blume, & Marks, 2005). The language we use attempts to reflect participants' self-labeling while at the same time using categories to distinguish persons based on assigned sex and experienced gender. The terms transgender or transpersons are used as umbrella terms to describe people identified across a broad spectrum of gender variance, including those who hold a non-binary identity such as genderqueer or gender fluid. The term transmen refers to people assigned a female sex at birth based on visible biological characteristics (in some studies referred to as natal females) and experiencing themselves as male, and the term transwomen refers to people assigned a male sex at birth based on visible biological characteristics (in some studies referred to as natal males) and experiencing themselves as female (Stryker, 2009). Cisgender

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is an adjective used to describe a person who identifies with the sex assigned at birth, and holds the essential gender roles matched to the sex assigned at birth (e.g., a birth assigned female who grows up to identify as a woman).

Body image is critically important during adolescence and young adulthood, and is also important among people who experience incongruence between their physical body and their experienced gender identity (Ålgars, Santtila, & Sandnabba, 2010; de Vries et al., 2014; Pfeffer, 2008). Body image can refer to responses to specific body parts, but in the present study, body image is conceptualized as one's subjective experience with the body, and how it relates to gender identity. Given the overlapping developmental tasks of consolidating a gender variant identity as well as developing a healthy broader adolescent/young adult identity, research on the body image among transgender young people is likely to provide a window into the broader linkages between body image and identity, and body image and gender in a way that studies of cisgender young people have not been able to elucidate. To that end, we focus our study of body image on the ways in which transgender identified young people experience their bodies, and relate to them as they change both across adolescent and young adult development, and across gender identity transitions. We frame the literature review around two developing research areas, satisfaction with body parts in the context of puberty suppression for transgender adolescents, and broader body image studies among transgender adults.

Puberty Suppression and Body Satisfaction

The experience of puberty is a general risk factor for body dissatisfaction (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2003; Slater & Tiggemann, 2012). For transgender youth, changes associated with puberty may be an uncomfortable reminder of the gender incongruence they feel (Pollock & Eyre, 2012), as mature body characteristics such as broad shoulders, wide hips, and facial hair serve as a reminder of incongruence between the body and the experienced gender identity (de Vries et al., 2014). When appearance is incongruent with personal experience, transgender persons may experience frustration or dissatisfaction with their own appearance. For transgender individuals, body image may include the degree of satisfaction with specific body parts, comfort with body size, and/or satisfaction with the gendered nature of one's appearance.

A series of studies within a single medical center serving most of the transgender individuals for the Netherlands have examined the experience of body image among transgender adolescents and young adults who are seeking and receiving puberty suppression as one component of a comprehensive approach to gender reassignment. Measures in these studies were quantitative, with a focus on satisfaction with specific body parts (i.e., hands, genitals, body hair), using the Body Image Scale (BIS) adapted for transgender individuals (de Vries et al., 2014; Lindgren & Pauly, 1975). In the first study, referred children who persisted in gender dysphoria into adolescence reported more dissatisfaction with primary, secondary, and neutral sex characteristics as adolescents. There were no differences between sex groups or within sex group (e.g., male-to-female, also called assigned male, or female-to-male, also called assigned female) by those who persisted in gender dysphoria compared to those who did not (Steensma, McGuire, Kreukels, Beekman, & Cohen-Kettenis, 2013). A later study in the same medical center found that across the period of puberty suppression, generally ages 12–16, overall body dissatisfaction did not change for birth assigned males (i.e., those who are labeled male at birth), but satisfaction with secondary and neutral characteristics did get slightly worse for birth assigned females (de Vries et al., 2014). While this may seem to be a negative finding, transgender youth who are seeking gender transition clinically report

increasing dissatisfaction across the period of life when secondary sex characteristics develop, and gendered body shapes become more pronounced. The finding of little or no change, even a small decline, suggests puberty suppression may contribute to staving off increasing dissatisfaction. Finally, when gender dysphoric adolescents were followed into young adulthood, satisfaction with body characteristics improved after the administration of cross-sex hormones and gender confirmation surgery (de Vries et al., 2014). Together, these studies suggest a developmental pathway for transgender youth that includes dissatisfaction with a body that does not match the experienced gender, coupled with improvement in body satisfaction when medical care is undertaken to bring body characteristics into alignment with the experienced gender.

What we do not gather from these studies is the nature of transgender youths' understanding of their bodies, more specifically, how they feel about their bodies' expression of gender characteristics and how that intersects with broader concerns about body size in this age group. Furthermore, clinical samples to date are largely missing youth who identify as genderqueer, which refers to a gender identity outside a binary system of gender classification. Finally, these studies focused on specific body characteristics rather than overall gendered body image or the internalization of cultural ideals of thinness, which have been found to be risk factors for eating disorders (Stice, 2002). In the current study, we address these gaps in the literature to better understand body image issues from transgender youth and young adult experiences.

Research on Transgender Adults

Findings regarding body image among transgender adults have been mixed, reflecting a complex continuum of responses to gender stereotypes. Male-to-female transgender adults' (transwomen's) body image has been compared to cisgender males and females, and their body satisfaction was generally found to be lower than cisgender males. Transwomen reported higher degrees of disturbed eating patterns including restraint, bingeing, and purging than did cisgender male or female controls; they also reported greater drive for thinness, body dissatisfaction, and body surveillance (Vocks, Stahn, Loenser, & Legenbauer, 2009). In another study, transwomen were twice as likely to report thin idealization, and three times more likely to report purging than controls which were matched by age and assigned sex (Ålgars et al., 2010). In one case report, drive for thinness was motivated by a desire to look more feminine (Ewan, Middleman, & Feldmann, 2014). Another study found that transwomen had a drive for thinness similar to cisgender males both before and after gender change (Khoosal, Langham, Palmer, Terry, & Minajagi, 2009). In contrast, a study of young adults ages 19–30, who were referred to medical clinics for military evaluation in Turkey, found that transwomen were more satisfied with their body weight compared to the age-matched heterosexual, cisgender, male controls (Bozkurt et al., 2006). Differing findings across countries may reflect cultural differences surrounding body image pressures.

Transmen have been studied in comparison to cisgender females and males. One study found transmen had more restrained eating, body mass and shape concerns, body dissatisfaction, and body surveillance compared to cisgender males (Vocks et al., 2009). In another study, partners of transmen described their partner's strong drive to do anything in their power to make their thighs smaller by dieting and exercising, including severe food restriction or fasting (Pfeffer, 2008). Transmen also reported more preoccupation with food and purging compared to controls matched by gender and assigned sex (Ålgars et al., 2010). Although many transgender individuals seek to transcend gender stereotypes (Wolfradt & Neumann, 2001), findings of body dissatisfaction may reflect the reach of heteronormative body image pressures, especially for

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